

GREEK CULTURE - Painting

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Ancient Greek painting must be understood in terms of its function as a social act, for there it is, developing side by side with temple architecture and both monumental and decorative sculpture, as part of the self-expression of the earliest Greek cultures, even of the Aegean--Minoan and Mycenaean--cultures, which preceded the Greek, and in which a florid painterly sense was already well developed as wall decoration. The curve of development of Greek pottery, and of the painting decorating it, closely went on to follow the curve of development in the other arts, following those breakthroughs, in the Archaic Age of the 8th century B.C.E., into what we must recognize as a new humane, naturalistic, and 'realized' form of expression. While painting was never in classical art to become the representational art it later became, in the Hellenistic period, the formative centuries of Greek visual imagination, from 1000 B.C.E. to 400 B.C.E. saw a rapid succession in painterly styles—Geometric, Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic—through which, largely in painting on pottery, the trademark naturalistic idealism of Greek painting displayed itself on every kind of pottery vehicle in daily Hellenic use.

Pottery trends. Square in the middle of the developmental sequence of early Greek painterly stages, we come on a 'geometric' bronze sculpture, of a man and a centaur about to fight, dating from the mid 8th century. This work belongs to an art period of which we might want to say, that it prioritizes linear, often stark juxtapositions of forms, or, in the case of the pottery beginning to proliferate at the time, functional and often linear painted pottery vessels designed each for a particular purpose--*amphoras*, for the burial of human ashes, and later for wine and oil transport; *aryballois* for perfume jars; *kraters*, for wine or water storage. The juxtaposition of figures on the *aryballois* of the Ajax painter, from the early 7th century B.C.E., are good examples of the kind of painterly work attained at that stage. The *aryballois* in question is only 2 7/8 inches in height—which will give an idea of the finesse of the work, which depicts a stylized band of animals around the neck of the tiny vase, and on the side full-height warrior portraits. For a tall counterpoint, to this miniature, painted perfume jar, contrast the Dipylon amphora (750 B.C.) from the Dipylon Cemetery in Athens. This five foot tall amphora, linearly painted with abstract cultish figures, served as a carrier for funeral ashes, and in its height, and intricacy of geometrical designs and stylized figures, would have served as a forceful indicator of the wealth and status of the cremated. The archaic mode of this work is qualified in a signal innovation: the painter-potter attaches his name to the work, in contrast to the anonymity of earlier workers in geometric pottery.

Pottery and painting. Jump from where we are—in the 8th century geometric, both tiny and grand-- to Exekias, a potter-painter of the early sixth century B.C.E., a renowned artist known for his numerous reworkings of themes from Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Look at Exekias' black figure amphora of Ajax and Achilles playing checkers, at a rare moment of downtime in the course of the Trojan War. (The black figure designs, with red backgrounds, gave the painter room for sharp profiles, while the red-figure paintings, which were a few decades later to win the pottery-painting vogue in Athens, allowed for more illumination and volatility in the depiction of the figures.) The figures are stylized but full of life, edgy, intent; no longer the formal and relatively expressionless presences we see on *geometrical* pottery. The painting has taken strides into the empirical and everyday.

Exekias As we see in the case of Exekias, painting and pottery developed hand in hand, and that will continue to be so into the 4th century B.C.E., when wall painting sprang out from Hellenistic cultures, and provided a freeing up of new imaginative figural powers, no longer tied to the pottery vehicle. Perhaps the perfect mating, of pottery and painting, occurs during the 5th century B.C.E., in which (480 B.C.E.) we come on exquisite, and fully felt, scenes like the Douris painter's Eos and Memnon, a small kylix, 10 inches in diameter, on the interior of which is painted a scene of the goddess of Dawn, Eos, lifting her dead and defeated son, whom Achilles has killed and stripped. The emotion of the bereaved mother, and the total extinction of her lifeless son, who lies in her arms, deploys a dignified pathos which may serve as a brief symbol for us, here, for the special purity of achievement of painting and pottery in the 5th century B.C.E.

Wall painting and the aryballos. From this point on we could follow the development of Greek painting on a course apart from pottery—a course leading toward dramatic Hellenistic wall paintings of the 4th century B.C. Or we can leave our tale at the point where painting was still an appendage of pottery, where it still finds itself in, for example, the white ground lekythos work of the so-called Reed painter, at the end of the fifth century B.C.E. We need to concentrate on the figure of the forlorn young man, sitting between two other figures, revealing in a few lines how profoundly he feels the death incinerated in the jar he decorates. We could hardly be more impressed, with the velocity of Greek cultural change, than by thinking from this point back three centuries to the modes of archaic potter artists like the maker of the perfume jar *aryballos*, with its stylized band of animals, at the beginning of the 7th century B.C.E.

Reading

Fullerton, Mark, *Greek Art*, Cambridge, 2000.

Mikalson, Jon, *Ancient Greek Religion* (Chichester, 2010).

Discussion questions

Is there such a thing as a minor art, or do all arts equally represent the culture they spring from? Does Greek pottery-painting seem to you to express important aspects of Greek culture? Do the changes in Greek pottery, from age to age, reflect parallel changes in Greek society itself?

Does Greek painting seem to you primarily functional—serving a purpose—or primarily aesthetic? Or are the two aspects of ceramic art inter related, so that what is beautiful is at the same time useful?

Does painting seem to be derivative from ceramic ware in Greece? Of course the Greeks and the Myceneans before them surrounded themselves with painting—on frescoes and walls—but was ancient painting, in the sense of design and portraiture, a derivative of ceramic art?